

National Endowment for the Arts 1965–1995:

*A Brief Chronology
of Federal Involvement
in the Arts*



President Johnson signs the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, establishing the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, on September 29, 1965.

Foreword

Thirty years ago this September, a group of artists, administrators, and Members of Congress gathered around President Lyndon Johnson at the White House as he signed legislation establishing the National Endowment for the Arts. That remarkable day was the culmination of over 140 years of debate over the proper role of the national government in the permanent encouragement of the arts. That September day was full of promise and optimism. Passionate men and women of vision worked together to create a new public service agency dedicated to the cultural life of this country. As we mark the 30th anniversary of the National Endowment for the Arts, we celebrate the rich and diverse culture that thrives in America.

This chronology is updated from an earlier version published on the 20th anniversary of the agency, compiled to show how the National Endowment for the Arts came into being, and how this agency has grown. As with the earlier edition, it is not meant to be the definitive history of Federal arts support, but rather a thumbnail version of some of the history and achievement.

The thirty year public investment in the arts has paid tremendous public dividends. Since 1965, the Endowment has awarded over 100,000 grants to arts organizations and artists in all 50 states. The number of state arts agencies has grown from 5 to 56. Local arts agencies now number over 3,800. Nonprofit theaters have grown from 46 to over 425, large orchestras have doubled in number, opera companies have increased six-fold, and there are ten times as many dance companies now as there were in 1965.

Individual artists who received Endowment fellowships at pivotal points in their careers have gone on to win over 50 Pulitzer Prizes, 25 National Book Awards, over 50 MacArthur “Genius” fellowships, numerous Tony Awards, Emmy Awards, and Academy Awards. Over the course of one generation, these American artists have created works of lasting value, works that our grandchildren’s grandchildren will savor.

The quality and level of arts education have been a concern over these past 30 years, as has our nation's dedication to preserving our cultural traditions and heritage. The clear and demonstrable success of this experiment is found in the quality of life for millions of Americans who are now able to participate in the arts in their communities. Thirty years before the founding of the Endowment, President Franklin Roosevelt said, "Inequality may linger in the world of material things, but great music, great literature, great art and the wonders of science are, and should be, open to all." Thirty years after the establishment of the Arts Endowment, his vision of access for all is closer than ever to reality.

As we celebrate the beginning of the fourth decade of public service through the arts, the National Endowment for the Arts pledges to continue its mission to foster the excellence, diversity and vitality of the arts in the United States and to broaden public access to the arts.

Jane Alexander

Chronology

1780

John Adams, in a letter to his wife, writes, “I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture.”

1785

Thomas Jefferson writes to James Madison: “You see I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts.”

1788

President George Washington declares that both “arts and sciences are essential to the prosperity of the state and to the ornament and happiness of human life.”

1790

Establishment of the United States Marine Band marks the first Federal support of a permanent musical ensemble.

1800

The Library of Congress is established by Act of Congress to provide “such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress.” Art and music are included in the early collection.

1817

The 14th Congress commissions John Trumbull to paint four Revolutionary War scenes to hang in the Capitol Rotunda, the first U.S. Federal support of the visual arts.

1826

John Trumbull, President of the American Academy of Fine Arts, proposes to President John Quincy Adams a “Plan for the Permanent Encouragement of the Fine Arts by the National Government.”

1846

After 10 years of deliberation, Congress accepts the bequest of the late James Smithson, and the Smithsonian Institution is established by Congress.

1859

President James Buchanan appoints a National Arts Commission to promote the arts, but it is disbanded two years later because of a lack of Congressional appropriations.

1879

Representative Samuel J. Cox (D-NY) introduces a Joint Resolution in Congress to establish “a council on arts matters.” No action is taken.

1891

President Benjamin Harrison signs legislation establishing the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. One year later it opens with Antonin Dvorak as its first artistic director.

1897

Congressional proposal introduced for a National Office of the Arts. No action is taken.

1899

Utah Arts Institute established, the first state-created arts council in the nation.

1906

The Federal government accepts the donation of Oriental art collection of Charles Lang Freer, who also provides for a building and endowment. The Freer Gallery, part of the Smithsonian Institution, opens to the public in 1923.

1909

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President Theodore Roosevelt appoints a 30-member Council of Fine Arts, but it is shortly disbanded due to lack of funds.

1910

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On May 17, President Taft and the Congress establish the Commission on Fine Arts “to advise generally upon questions of art.” It deals primarily with the architectural appearance of Washington, D.C.

1913

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The National Institute of Arts and Letters is incorporated under a Federal charter by an Act of Congress. The American Academy of Arts and Letters is incorporated three years later, and both organizations merge in 1976.

1934

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt establishes the Treasury Department’s Section on Painting and Sculpture, the first government bureau involving the arts, which assigns artists to decorate Federal buildings around the country.

1935

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Public service employment programs are established under the Works Progress Administration: the Federal Writers Program, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Art Project, and the Federal Music Project. More than 40,000 artists are directly employed by the government.

1937

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Andrew W. Mellon donates his art collection to the United States, pledges funds for construction of the National Gallery of Art, and creates an endowment for the Gallery, which opens to the public in 1941.

1937

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In Congress, Representative William I. Sirovich (D-NY) introduces legislation to establish a Department of Science, Art & Literature to be headed by a Cabinet-rank officer. Later in the year, Representative John M. Coffee (D-WA) introduces a bill to establish a Bureau of Fine Arts. Neither proposal is reported out of committee.

1938

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Senator Claude Pepper (D-FL) introduces a bill for the creation of a Bureau of Fine Arts. The bill is not reported out of committee.

1948–49

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The country's first local arts agencies are established: the Quincy Society of Fine Arts in Illinois and the Winston-Salem Arts Council in North Carolina.

1949

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Congressman Jacob K. Javits (R-NY) introduces House Joint Resolution 104 in the 81st Congress to provide for a national theater, national opera and national ballet. Javits stresses that he is not talking about a physical structure, but rather “an integrated, country-wide organization aided by the Federal government.” The Resolution is not reported out of committee.

1951

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President Harry S Truman asks the Commission on Fine Arts to investigate ways in which the arts could be helped by the Federal government.

1953

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The Commission on Fine Arts reports to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, recommending that a cultural center be established in Washington, DC, under the jurisdiction of the Federal government.

1955

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President Eisenhower, in his State of the Union Address, advocates the establishment of a Federal Advisory Commission on the Arts:

“In the advancement of the various activities which would make our civilization endure and flourish, the Federal government should do more to give official recognition of the importance of the arts and other cultural activities.”

1955

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Numerous bills to support the arts are introduced in Congress over the next several year, but no action beyond limited hearings is taken. Nelson Rockefeller, then Undersecretary of Health, Education and Welfare, pushes for the establishment of a National Council on the Arts but is unsuccessful with Congress.

1958

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President Eisenhower signs P.L. 85-874 to establish a National Cultural Center for the performing arts. Thirteen years later, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts opens in Washington, DC.

1960

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The New York State Council on the Arts is founded by Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

1960

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Associated Councils of the Arts founded to provide informational training, research and publication services to state and community arts agencies and to act as a national advocate for the arts. In 1977, they changed their name to American Council for the Arts.

FEBRUARY 9, 1961

Representative Frank Thompson (D-NJ) introduces H.R. 4172 to establish an advisory council on the arts, within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, that would coordinate between private and government arts activities. Hearings are held, but the bill is defeated in the House.

SEPTEMBER 2, 1961

President John F. Kennedy appoints Roger L. Stevens Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Cultural Center.

MARCH 1962

President Kennedy appoints August Heckscher as his Special Consultant as his Special Consultant on the Arts and asks him to prepare a report on the relationship between the arts and the Federal government.

JANUARY 14, 1963

Senator Javits (R-NY) introduces S. 165 “to establish a United States National Arts Foundation.” Initial co-sponsors are Senators Joseph Clark (D-PA), Hubert Humphrey (D-MN), and Claiborne Pell (D-RI).

APRIL 11, 1963

Senator Humphrey introduces S. 1316 “to establish a National Council on the Arts and a National Arts Foundation to assist the growth and development of the arts in the United States.” Initial co-sponsors are Senators Clark, John Sherman Cooper (R-KY), Javits, Russell B. Long (D-LA), Lee Metcalf (D-MT), Pell, Jennings Randolph (D-WV), Abraham Ribicoff (D-CT), and Hugh Scott (R-PA).

MAY 28, 1963

August Hecksher submits his report, *The Arts and the National Government*, which recommends the establishment of an Advisory Council on the Arts and a National Arts Foundation to administer grants-in-aid.

JUNE 12, 1963

By Executive Order 11112, President Kennedy establishes the President's Advisory Council on the Arts. Members are not appointed before the President is assassinated.

"We have agencies of the Government which are concerned with the welfare and advancement of science and technology, of education, recreation, and health. We should now begin to give similar attention to the arts."

OCTOBER 26, 1963

At the dedication of a new library at Amherst College and tribute to the poet Robert Frost, President Kennedy says:

"I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him."

"I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward achievement in business or statecraft."

"I look forward to an America which will steadily raise the standards of artistic accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all our citizens."

DECEMBER 20, 1963

After hearings chaired by Senator Pell, Chairman of the Senate Special Subcommittee on the Arts, the Senate passes S. 2379 which combines provisions of the two earlier bills, S. 165 and S. 1316, to establish a National Council on the Arts and a National Arts Foundation.

JANUARY 8, 1964

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In the House, Representative Thompson introduces H.R. 9586 “to provide for the establishment of a National Council on the Arts to assist in the growth and development of the arts in the United States,” and H.R. 9587 “to provide for the establishment of a National Council on the Arts and a National Arts Foundation to assist in the growth and development of the arts in the United States.”

JANUARY 23, 1964

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President Lyndon B. Johnson signs Senate Joint Resolution 136, renaming the National Cultural Center as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and designating it as Kennedy’s official memorial in Washington.

MAY 13, 1964

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President Johnson names Roger L. Stevens Special Assistant to the President on the Arts, the first full-time arts advisor.

AUGUST 20, 1964

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H.R. 9586, to establish a National Council on the Arts, passes the House of Representatives by a vote of 213 to 135. The Senate passes the bill the following day on a voice vote.

SEPTEMBER 3, 1964

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The National Arts and Cultural Development Act of 1964 is signed by the President, establishing the National Council on the Arts, providing for a chairman, the Secretary of the Smithsonian ex officio, and 24 other members to “recommend ways to maintain and increase the cultural resources of the Nation and to encourage and develop greater appreciation and enjoyment of the arts by its citizens.” One month later, an appropriation of \$50,000 is approved for the National Council on the Arts.

DECEMBER 2, 1964

President Johnson breaks ground for the Kennedy Center.

“No act of Congress or Executive Order can call a great musician or poet into existence. But we can stand on the sidelines and cheer. We can maintain and strengthen an atmosphere to permit the arts to flourish, and those who have talent to use it. And we can seek to enlarge the access of all our people to artistic creation.”

FEBRUARY–MARCH 1965

Special subcommittees of both Houses of Congress (chaired by Pell in the Senate and Thompson in the House) hold hearings on legislation to establish a National Arts Foundation.

FEBRUARY 23, 1965

President Johnson appoints 24 members and one ex officio member as the National Council on the Arts.

MARCH 10, 1965

President Johnson asks the 89th Congress to establish the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities.

“This Congress will consider many programs which will leave an enduring mark on American life. But it may well be that passage of this legislation, modest as it is, will help secure for this Congress a sure and honored place in the story of the advance of our civilization.”

Administration bills are introduced in both Houses of Congress by Pell and Thompson.

MARCH 11, 1965

Roger L. Stevens is appointed Chairman of the National Council on the Arts by the President.

MARCH 19, 1965

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund issues the results of a two-year study entitled "The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects" which lists a number of recommendations, including one that states: ". . . while private support should remain dominant, the Federal government — together with state and local governments — should give strong support to the arts, including the performing arts, by appropriate recognition of their importance, by direct and indirect encouragement, and by financial cooperation."

Nancy Hanks is director of the Special Studies Project staff which compiles the report.

APRIL 9-10, 1965

The first meeting of the National Council on the Arts starts at the White with President Johnson swearing in the members (see page TK):

"Our civilization will largely survive in the works of our creation. There is a quality in art which speaks across the gulf dividing man from man and nation from nation, and century from century. That quality confirms the faith that our common hopes may be more enduring than our conflicting hostilities. Even now men of affairs are struggling to catch up with the insights of great art. The stakes may well be the survival of civilization."

JUNE 10, 1965

Senate debates and passes an amended S. 1483 to establish a National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities.

JUNE 24-27, 1965

Second meeting of the National Council on the Arts held in Tarrytown, New York.

SEPTEMBER 15, 1965

House passes S. 1483, with amendments. The following day, the Senate agrees with House amendments and passes legislation establishing the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities as an umbrella for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities and their respective Councils.

September 29, 1965 President Johnson signs P.L. 89-209, the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act.

“Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Under this new law, Arts Council membership is increased to 26. The Chairman of the National Council on the Arts, Roger Stevens, becomes Chairman of the Arts Endowment. Henry Allen Moe becomes the first Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Foundation is composed of the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the interagency committee of Federal officials called the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The Foundation has no administrative or programming identity separate from its components. Each of the two Endowments is served by a respective advisory body, the National Council on the Arts and the National Council on the Humanities.